

*One Earth week prior to the invasion; an undisclosed location*

The short, gray robed figure wearing a porcelain mask enters a dimly lit chamber. Taking a brief moment to glance through the windows, the figure looks down into a very large cavern where several ships sit in varying states of construction. At the far end of the room another solitary figure waits holding a crystal staff, looking out the windows.

The figure approaches the much larger figure and says, "Sir, it has come to my attention that the one called Babel is preparing to attack."

"Strange that he failed to mention that to us isn't it Varen?" the Staffbearer says, his voice heavy with sarcasm, "Tell Demos to avoid involving himself in the attack, but remain nearby covertly and observe."

"You are not upset?" the Varen asks.

"No. He made it patently obvious that he would carry out his plan regardless of what warnings we provided. His greed will punish him more than we ever could. He deserves what he will get at their hands," the Staffbearer replies.

"Then why have Demos there at all?" the other man asks.

The figure watches the activity below for several moments before replying, "To Record Babel's humiliation... and to ... watch."

Varen thinks about the statement, cocks his mask to one side then he says, "Ah! You hope that Lorelee will interfere. Demos will be there to watch for her. When she shows up, Demos will prevent her interference."

The Staffbearer's mask faces the other, "Hope has nothing to do with it. It is a careful calculation with high probability that she will interfere. I warned her of the consequences. Her ... repeated and continual interaction with the usurpers has corrupted her and she now identifies with them. Thus her utility to the master plan has come to an end. Therefore Demos will carry out the earlier dictates of the Assembly. Now go and issue my instructions, the time for explanations is at an end."

The figure bows slightly and says as he backs away, "At once, Staffbearer."

---

*April 25, 2501 - 2230 hours; Office of the Commandant; UPC StarCorp Headquarters, Mars, Sol System*

Admiral Collingsworth finishes reviewing the datapad for a second time. "Colonel Jones, are you sure of this?" he asks.

"Yessir," the Colonel replies, still dressed in civilian clothes, "Just so happens I was preparing to leave the Saga system when the attack began. The LJ ship I was on barely got away. I assume several others were boarded 'cause they were nowhere near as ready for jump. Who knows what is going on there now. We received that <indicating the datapad> from the intra-system network right before we jumped. I figured it was worth using the special protocols with the LJ captain to get him to divert here. <He looks at his watch> That would make it at least eight hours old."

"You figured correctly Colonel. I'll have someone talk to the LJ captain and his crew," the Admiral replies. He thumbs the datapad a third time.

The television show blanks out as the crimson symbol of the M'lok Brigade fills the screen with a patriotic soundtrack mixed into the background. A monotone voice begins speaking, "*For countless decades, mankind has been held under the thumb of the Hawdon family, their monopoly in interstellar communications unassailable. The stellar governments, complicit in this arrangement, have allowed the Hawdon family and their ilk to leach the lifeblood from every person in known space.*

*Today, that ends. The heroic members of the M'lok Brigade are putting their lives on the line to do what the stellar governments failed to do: break that monopoly and remove the shadow of Hawdon domination that hovers all around us.*

---

---

*We call upon all free thinking peoples to rise up and seize Hawdon facilities and detain their personnel. While our brothers and sisters do the same in the Hawdon stronghold of Saga. We are not calling for the death of Hawdon personnel. No, only through them can the taint be fully cleansed from our way of life. We offer a reward for anyone turning in these people, whole and healthy. We will broadcast another message once we have seized GalactiComm and cleansed the taint from Saga, giving specific instructions on where to go to get your reward.*

Stand strong... Deliverance is at hand!" And the image blurs out and returns to the original signal.

"Who would buy this crap?" he asks then thumbs the intercom on his desk, "Lieutenant, pass orders for all Sector commanders to prepare for a live vidcomp session in fifteen." After a couple of moments, there is no response.

The Colonel starts for the door to the office when the Lieutenant comes in, his face pale. He walks over to the main vidcomp display and says, "Sir, you should see this." He activates the display and enters a code for the Cyngus Sector Command HQ. The vidcomp displays the Hawdon logo slowly rotating with "GalactiComm Offline" and "Error DTE-0001 – Interstellar communications currently unavailable" beneath it.

The Admiral's blood runs cold as the Colonel replies softly, still staring at the screen, "I think a lot more will now sir."

The vidcomp on the Admiral's desk chirps for attention. The Admiral closes his eyes briefly before putting the headset on his right ear. "Yes Mr. President," he answers then listens as the questions begin. "As far as we can tell at the moment, a group of terrorists are trying to seize control of the GalactiComm. It looks like they managed to take down the network." He pauses as more words bombard the Admiral. "Yes sir, I concur with that. Orders are going out now. I will call you back in fifteen minutes once things are underway. Yes sir. Good sir. Bye sir." He pulls the headset from his ear and looks up at the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant," he begins, "Once the various commands learn that GCOM is offline, they will begin implementing the Gamma Black protocols. Get to operations and personally let the duty officer know that I want marines stationed at every Hawdon facility in UPC space. No one in or out without my express permission. Once they do that, find as many Hawdon personnel outside those facilities and escort them to the nearest Hawdon facility. The marines are to provide the facilities any food, water, or other necessities as requested. The marines are authorized to use lethal force to defend those facilities and personnel. Am I clear?"

"Uh... Yes, sir. But might I ask, what are Gamma Black protocols?" the lieutenant asks shakily.

"The plan that we use in the event that GCOM ever goes down lieutenant," Colonel Jones replies. "Every ship in the fleet becomes a courier. The protocol setups a distribution network to relay critical messages throughout the UPC."

"And one more thing," the Admiral interrupts, "I want the next available ship to go to the Bozeman system. All ships there are to make sure the HSS Lightbridge 2 does not depart the system. That ship may be the only way possible of returning GCOM to operational status."

"Yessir!" the young man snaps and moves out of the room.

The Admiral shifts his gaze to the Colonel, "Colonel, I think you have your work cut out for you," he says.

"Sir!" The Colonel salutes and departs, leaving the Admiral contemplating the spinning logo on the vidcomp display.